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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the importance of and bases for initiatives to enhance students' social, emotional, and behavioral performance as an essential facet of improving academic performance. Research on comprehensive approaches for addressing barriers to learning is still in development. Data from natural experiments underscore societal inequities that can be remedied through public financing for comprehensive programs and services. Formal studies have focused on specific interventions. This literature reports positive outcomes associated with a wide range of interventions. The research base is highlighted by organizing examples into the six areas of concern: (1) enhancing classroom teachers' capacity for addressing problems and for fostering social, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development; (2) enhancing school capacity to handle transition concerns confronting students and families; (3) responding to, minimizing the impact of, and preventing crisis; (4) enhancing home involvement; (5) outreaching to the community to build linkages and collaborations; and (6) providing special assistance to students and families. (Contains 126 references.) (SM)

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Mental Health in Schools Center
Training and Technical Assistance

A Center Brief . . .

Addressing Barriers to Student Learning & Promoting Healthy Development: A Usable Research-Base

November, 2000

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HRSA Health Resources and Services Administration
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CMHS Center for Mental Health Services
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ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO STUDENT LEARNING & PROMOTING HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT: A USABLE RESEARCH-BASE

> School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students.
>
> But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.
>
> Carnegie Council Task Force (1989)

As schools evolve their improvement plans in keeping with higher standards and expectations and increased accountability, most planners recognize they must include a comprehensive focus on addressing barriers to student learning and promoting healthy development.[1-15] This awareness finds support in an extensive body of literature. It is illustrated by a growing volume of research on the value of schools, families, and communities working together to provide supportive programs and services that enable students to learn and teachers to teach.[16-22] Findings include improved school attendance, fewer behavior problems, improved interpersonal skills, enhanced achievement, and increased bonding at school and at home.[23]

Given the promising findings, state and local education agencies all over the country are delineating ways to enhance social, emotional, and behavioral performance as an essential facet of improving academic performance. Among the many initiatives underway is *Success4*[24] spearheaded by the Iowa State Department of Education. That department recently asked our Center to identify for policy makers research clarifying the importance of and bases for such initiatives. The following is what we provided.

About the Research Base

At the outset, we note that research on comprehensive approaches for addressing barriers to learning is still in its infancy. There are, of course, many "natural" experiments underscoring the promise of ensuring all youngsters access to a comprehensive, multifaceted continuum of interventions. These natural experiments are playing out in every school and neighborhood where families are affluent enough to purchase the additional programs and services they feel will maximize their youngsters' well-being. It is obvious that those who can afford such interventions understand their value. And, not surprisingly, most indicators of well-being, including higher achievement test scores, are correlated with socio-economic status. Available data underscore societal inequities that can be remedied through public financing for comprehensive programs and services.

Most *formal* studies have focused on specific interventions. This literature reports positive outcomes (for school and society) associated with a wide range of interventions. Because of the fragmented nature of available research, the

findings are best appreciated in terms of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, and implications are best derived from the total theoretical and empirical picture. When such a broad perspective is adopted, schools have a large research base to draw upon in addressing barriers to learning and enhancing healthy development.[24]

The research-base is highlighted below by organizing examples into the six areas of concern: (1) enhancing classroom teachers' capacity for addressing problems and for fostering social, emotional, intellectual and behavioral development, (2) enhancing school capacity to handle transition concerns confronting students and families, (3) responding to, minimizing impact of, and preventing crisis, (4) enhancing home involvement, (5) outreaching to the community to build linkages and collaborations, and (6) providing special assistance to students and families.

(1) Enhancing teacher capacity for addressing problems and for fostering social, emotional, intellectual and behavioral development. When a classroom teacher encounters difficulty in working with a youngster, the first step is to see whether there are ways to address the problem within the classroom and perhaps with added home involvement. It is essential to equip teachers to respond to garden variety learning, behavior, and emotional problems using more than social control strategies for classroom management. Teachers must be helped to learn many ways to enable the learning of such students, and schools must develop school-wide approaches to assist teachers in doing this fundamental work. The literature offers many relevant practices. A few prominent examples are: prereferral intervention efforts, tutoring (e.g., one-to-one or small group instruction), enhancing protective factors, and assets building (including use of curriculum-based approaches for promoting social emotional development). Outcome data related to such matters indicate that they do make a difference.

- Many forms of *prereferral intervention programs* have shown success in reducing learning and behavior problems and unnecessary referrals for special assistance and special education.[25-31]

- Although only a few *tutoring programs* have been evaluated systematically, available studies report positive effects on academic performance when tutors are trained and appropriately used.[32-38]

- And, of course, *programs that reduce class size* are finding increases in academic performance and decreases in discipline problems.[39-43]

(2) Enhancing school capacity to handle the variety of transition concerns confronting students and their families. It has taken a long time for schools to face up to the importance of establishing transition programs. In recent years, a beginning has been made. Transition programs are an essential facet of reducing levels of alienation and increasing levels of positive attitudes toward and involvement at school and in learning. Thus, schools must plan, develop, and maintain a focus on the variety of transition concerns confronting students and their families. Examples of relevant practices are readiness to learn programs, before and after school programs to enrich learning and provide recreation in a safe environment, articulation programs (for each new step in formal education, vocational and college counseling, support in moving to and from special education), welcoming and social support programs, school-to-career programs, and programs to support moving to post school living and work. Interventions to enable successful transitions have made a significant difference in how motivationally ready and able students are to benefit from schooling. For instance:

- Available evidence supports the positive impact of *early childhood programs* in preparing young children for school. The programs are associated with increases in academic performance and may even contribute to decreases in discipline problems in later school years.[44-49]

- There is enough evidence that *before- and after-school programs* keep kids safe and steer them away from crime, and some evidence suggesting such programs can improve academic performance.[50-53]

- Evaluations show that well-conceived and implemented *articulation programs* can successfully ease students' transition between grades,[54-56] and preliminary evidence suggests the promise of programs that provide *welcoming and social support* for children and families transitioning into a new school.[57, 58]

- Initial studies of programs for transition *in and out of special education* suggest the interventions can enhance students' attitudes about school and self and can improve their academic performance.[59-61]

- Finally, programs providing *vocational training and career education* are having an impact in terms of increasing school retention and graduation and show promise for successfully placing students in jobs following graduation.[62-66]

(3) Responding to, minimizing impact, and preventing crisis. The need for crisis response and prevention is constant in many schools. Such efforts ensure assistance is provided when emergencies arise and follow-up care is provided as necessary and appropriate so that students can resume learning without undue delays. Prevention activity stresses creation of a safe and productive environment and the development of student and family attitudes about and capacities for dealing with violence and other threats to safety. Examples of school efforts include (1) systems and programs for emergency/crisis response at a site, throughout a complex/family of schools, and community-wide (including a program to ensure follow-up care) and (2) prevention programs for school and community to address school safety and violence reduction, child abuse and suicide prevention, and so forth. Examples of relevant practices are establishment of a crisis team to ensure crisis response and aftermath interventions are planned and implemented, school environment changes and safety strategies, curriculum approaches to preventing crisis events (violence, suicide, and physical/ sexual abuse prevention). Current trends are stressing school- and community-wide prevention pro-grams. Most research in this area focuses on

- programs designed to ensure a *safe and disciplined school environment* as a key to deterring violence and reducing injury

- *violence prevention and resiliency curriculum* designed to teach children anger management, problem-solving skills, social skills, and conflict resolution.

In both instances, the evidence supports a variety of practices that help reduce injuries and violent incidents in schools.[67-85]

(4) Enhancing home involvement. In recent years, the trend has been to expand the nature and scope of the school's focus on enhancing home involvement. Intervention practices encompass efforts to (a) address specific learning and support needs of adults in the home (e.g., classes to enhance literacy, job skills, ESL, mutual support groups), (b) help those in the home meet basic obligations to the student, (c) improve systems to communicate about matters essential to student and family, (d) strengthen the home-school connection and sense of community, (e) enhance participation in making decisions essential to the student's well-being, (f) enhance home support related to the student's basic learning and development, (g) mobilize those at home to problem solve related to student needs, and (h) elicit help (support, collaborations, and partnerships) from the home with respect to meeting classroom, school, and community needs. The context for some of this activity may be a parent center (which may be part of the Family and Community Service Center Facility if one has been established at the site). A few examples illustrate the growing research-base for expanded home involvement.

- *Adult education* is a proven commodity in general and is beginning to be studied in terms of its impact on home involvement in schooling and on the behavior and achievement of youngsters in the family. For example, evaluations of adult education in the form of *family literacy* are reporting highly positive outcomes with respect to preschool children, and a summary of findings on family literacy reports highly positive trends into the elementary grades.[86]

- Similarly, evaluations of *parent education* classes indicate the promise of such programs with respect to improving parent attitudes, skills, and problem solving abilities; parent-child communication; and in some instances the child's school achievement.[87-90] Data also suggest an impact on reducing children's negative behavior.[91-99]

- More broadly, programs to *mobilize the home in addressing students' basic needs* effect a range of behaviors and academic performance.[100]

(5) Outreaching to the community to build linkages and collaborations. The aim of outreach to the community is to develop greater involvement in schooling and enhance support for efforts to enable learning. Outreach may be made to (a) public and private community agencies, colleges, organizations, and facilities, (b) businesses and professional organizations and groups, and (c) volunteer service programs, organizations and clubs. Efforts in this area might include 1) programs to recruit and enhance community involvement and support (e.g., linkages and integration with community health and social services; cadres of volunteers, mentors, and individuals with special expertise and resources; local businesses to adopt-a-school and provide resources, awards, incentives, and jobs; formal partnership arrangements), 2) systems and programs specifically designed to train, screen, and maintain volunteers (e.g., parents, college students, senior citizens, peer and cross-age tutors/counselors, and professionals-in-training to provide direct help for staff and students--especially targeted students), 3) outreach programs to hard-to-involve students and families (those who don't come to school regularly -- including truants and dropouts), and 4) programs to enhance community-school connections and sense of community (e.g., orientations, open houses, performances and cultural and sports events, festivals and celebrations, workshops and fairs). A Family and Community Service Center Facility might be a context for some of this activity.

(Note: When there is an emphasis on bringing community services to school sites, care must be taken to avoid creating a new form of fragmentation where community and school professionals engage in a form of parallel play at school sites.)

The research-base for involving the community is growing.

- A popular example are the various *mentoring and volunteer programs*. Available data support their value for both students and those from the community who offer to provide such supports. Student outcomes include positive changes in attitudes, behavior, and academic performance (including improved school attendance, reduced substance abuse, less school failure, improved grades).[101-105]

- Another example are the efforts to outreach to the community to develop *school-community collaborations*. A reasonable inference from available data is that school-community collaborations can be successful and cost-effective over the long-run.[106-110] They not only improve access to services, they seem to encourage schools to open their doors in ways that enhance recreational, enrichment, and remedial opportunities and family involvement. A few have encompassed concerns for economic development and have demonstrated the ability to increase job opportunities for young people.

(6) Providing special assistance for students and families. Some problems cannot be handled without a few special interventions; thus the need for student and family assistance. The emphasis is on providing special services in a personalized way to assist with a broad-range of needs. School-owned, based, and linked interventions clearly provide better access for many youngsters and their families. Moreover, as a result of initiatives that enhance school-owned support programs and those fostering school-linked services and school-community partnerships (e.g., full services schools, family resource centers, etc.), more schools have more to offer in the way of student and family assistance. In current practice, available social, physical and mental health programs in the school and community are used. Special attention is paid to enhancing systems for prereferral intervention, triage, case and resource management, direct services to meet immediate needs, and referral for special services and special education resources and placements as appropriate. A growing body of data indicates the current contribution and future promise of work in this area. For example:

- The more *comprehensive approaches* not only report results related to ameliorating health and psychosocial problems, they are beginning to report a range of academic improvements (e.g., increased attendance, improved grades, improved achievement, promotion to the next grade, reduced suspensions and expulsions, fewer dropouts, increased graduation rates).[111-120]

- A rapidly increasing number of *targeted interventions* are reporting positive results related to the specific problems addressed (e.g., reduced behavior, emotional, and learning problems, enhanced positive social-emotional functioning, reduced sexual activity, lower rates of unnecessary referral to special education, fewer visits to hospital emergency rooms, and fewer hospitalizations).[121-125]

Concluding Comments

Taken as a whole, the research-base for initiatives to pursue a comprehensive focus on addressing barriers to student learning and promoting healthy development indicates a range of activity that can enable students to learn and teachers to teach. The findings also underscore that addressing major psychosocial problems one at a time is unwise because the problems are interrelated and require multifaceted and cohesive solutions. In all, the literature both provides models for content of such activity and also stresses the importance of coalescing such activity into a comprehensive, multifaceted approach.

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